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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Women, the Victims of Violence

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Escalating violence in the past two months has claimed the lives of an estimated 250 Somalis, has injured more than 1500, and has driven thousands from their homes. Increasingly, women are being directly targeted and are bearing the brunt of the conflict's devastating consequences. Somali women have told us that there has been an upsurge in brutal attacks against women, as well as of rapes, kidnappings, and killings. The rise in violence has spurred an accelerated flight of women and their families from Mogadishu and surrounding areas. Because of the violence, local markets have shut down and others, like Bakara market, are now completely under al-Shabaab control. Without daily access to markets, women have lost critical income-generating opportunities. Al-Shabaab has brought with it a brand of Islam that further limits opportunities for women and girls, resulting in increased social segregation. In addition, Somalis fear targeting and retaliation by al-Shabaab should they attempt to resist or counter its influence. Although many NGO leaders and international organizations have withdrawn from Mogadishu, women with whom we spoke offered concrete proposals for ways to immediately and directly impact the lives of Somalia's most vulnerable populations. End Summary.

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Women Increasingly Targeted  
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¶2. (SBU) The recent surge in violence, especially in Mogadishu, has had a profound impact on Somalia's most vulnerable populations, especially women. During a series of individual and small group discussions, Somali women - including those inside the country, those who have recently fled, and women in the Diaspora - voiced several concerns. They told us of an upsurge in brutal attacks against women, including killings, rape, and kidnapping. (Note: While this type of violence is not new in Somalia, the frequency and the systematic nature of it appear to be increasing. End note.) Like men, women who lead local NGOs or run businesses, or those who are associated with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), are reportedly increasingly targeted. Kadija Ali, president of the board of SAACID, an NGO working in South Central Somalia to improve the lives of women and children, related the account of a businesswoman who was shot in the head and killed in Mogadishu on June 25. The woman was considered too "outspoken" and was directly targeted because of her leadership role in the community. Our contacts told us that attacks like this have become commonplace.

¶3. (SBU) Asli Duale, a 46-year old Mogadishu-born women's rights activist who left the capital just a few days ago, recounted

numerous recent attacks. On July 1, three women who were accused of being informants for the TFG were brutally killed. The week of June 22, a 14-year-old girl in Mogadishu's contested Karan district went out in the morning to fetch baking ingredients from a local shop, and was captured by insurgents. The young girl was raped and beaten, and is still in the hospital. Duale spoke of another recent victim, a woman in her early 30s who sold khat in the Shibis district. Insurgents, who had been taking khat from her without paying, later kidnapped the woman, drove her miles away from Mogadishu, tortured, and eventually killed her.

¶4. (SBU) Gender-based violence is a major problem, and not just in southern Somalia. A UNHCR senior protection officer based in Hargeisa (Somaliland) noted that "rape is common and underreported," both within villages and in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. She alleged to us that women are frequently beaten. Several of our contacts have also noted a rising problem of fistula among women, as many who flee their homes in southern Somalia as the result of conflict are forced to give birth on the road.

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Lost Economic Opportunities:  
Markets Close and Many Forced to Flee  
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¶5. (SBU) The economic ramifications of the escalating violence disproportionately affect women. During the last 18 years, Somali women had often become the main breadwinners, as men had either joined the fighting or been less successful in finding employment. Several women acknowledged that because women are less educated than men, they have had a harder time, but in many cases have been able

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support their families through small trade or business, often selling vegetables or goods at local markets. Today, many of those markets are closed. Bakara market, the largest in Mogadishu, is now completely controlled by al-Shabaab, and many women have told us that it is now off-limits for anyone but allies of the extremists. In addition, many of the poorest had relied on a day-labor market, which has now virtually disappeared.

¶6. (SBU) Our contacts told us that more than ever before, there are severe risks associated with daily life in the capital. After the August 2008 roadside bomb that killed 20 and injured 47 others, most of whom were women cleaning Mogadishu streets, women are increasingly fearful of conducting their daily activities, working, or engaging in small-scale business.

¶7. (SBU) The recent violence has also forced more and more families to flee their homes, either to other areas of the country, congested IDP camps, or outside of the country. Women predominantly lead this flight, especially within Somalia, as men are increasingly recruited to take arms. "The whole struggle is on women's shoulders," noted a female, Bossaso-based project officer for Mercy Corps, who is in charge of emergency response to the influx of IDPs in Puntland. Rather than leaving the country, many women have sought safety in other regions like Puntland, Somaliland, and in other areas within Mogadishu. Mogadishu, once with a population of roughly 1.6 million, is estimated to have about 650,000 people remaining - half of whom are too poor to leave. Duale told us, "We are running from bullets. The first thing you think of is to take your children and run far away, but you cannot manage because there are bullets everywhere - people are desperate." Some women hire wheelbarrows and trucks to take small bags of their possessions - food, their children's clothes, charcoal, small kitchen goods with them to safer areas. Others flee with nothing.

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Changes in Women's Roles  
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¶8. (SBU) Many of the older Somali women we talked with in Nairobi spoke about how women's roles have changed over the last twenty years. Religious conservatism and extremism have most noticeably impacted women. Dahabo Omar Mohamed, an older Somali woman who left Mogadishu in February 2008 - but continues to serve as a contact for

the Coalition for Grassroots Women Organizations (COGWO) - noted that under Siad Barre's regime, the "law was there for women," even if it was not fully implemented. At that time, primary education was required for both boys and girls. Today, many public schools have closed or been targeted, and the gender disparity within schools has widened. According to UNFPA, approximately one fifth of the population is literate (19.2 per cent), and there are 10 boys for every 8 girls in primary school; in secondary school, the ratio is 10 to 5.

¶9. (SBU) Hibo Yassin, the chairwoman of the Somali Women Agenda, an umbrella organization based in Nairobi, spoke of the days when it was common for women to do everything alongside men - attend school, play sports, work in agriculture, and move around the community. Today, she noted that girls are no longer allowed to fully participate in social and economic activities. Women now cover themselves completely, and leave the house less, or risk being targeted. Our contacts told us even old women are forced to sit in the back of buses in al-Shabaab-controlled areas, and are whipped if they sit in front. Sahra Omar Maalin, chair of IIDA, an influential women's rights organization, said "Our culture has completely changed" and noted that today, the insurgents "make us shy."

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Women Too Fearful To Organize  
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¶10. (SBU) When asked whether women in Mogadishu are organizing, Asli Duale replied "how can you organize anything when you are running from a flying bullet?" Dahabo Mohamed, who routinely speaks to many of her sister organizations in Somalia, told us, "Today, women can't go anywhere. No one wants women to be involved. In this period, you can't lobby for women's rights because everyone is paralyzed." Many of the local NGO leaders we spoke with left the country in recent months, even after staying and working during the last, turbulent twenty years.

¶11. (SBU) With direct targeting of community leaders, suicide

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bombings, and recent retaliations, women and community leaders are much more hesitant to organize, for fear of the wrath of al-Shabaab. They told us that al-Shabaab's intelligence operation is so sophisticated that it launches attacks as soon as it senses organized resistance. Our contacts described a climate of terror that has engulfed communities in recent weeks, making everyone fearful of what will happen next. Asli Duale noted, "Somalia is not the place where you can demonstrate. You don't have that access - women are just running with their children." Kadija Ali said that "if al-Shabaab comes we are buried alive. They don't have an agenda for Somalia; their agenda is global. The TFG is at least backed by the West, and there women can shout."

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International Organizations Absent  
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¶12. (SBU) Many Somali women emphasized that despite the humanitarian crisis, and worsening situation for women and children, they feel that the international community has completely disappeared from the scene. "The NGOs are the ones who run fast," one woman noted. "They are targeted and they have the means to leave." The most educated Somalis have also fled. Hawa, the country director of SAACID who continues to run a wet feeding program in Mogadishu, said that she would be surprised if there were even a dozen doctors left in Mogadishu, and that nurses were now performing surgery.

¶13. (SBU) Women overwhelmingly expressed a sense of desperation and urgency in their need to tell the world what is happening, but lamented their lack of capacity. They spoke of the international community being "tired of Somalia after twenty years." Many feel that donors distrust local Somali NGOs. Resources are overwhelmingly diverted to UN agencies, which remain "removed from reality because they must work from Nairobi." The women felt that "remote control" of local organizations in the field had failed, as

funding and capacity have yet to be transferred to Somali organizations. Equally, many Somali women voiced a distrust of the international community. "I don't see anything moving," Hawa noted.

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#### Addressing the Gaps and Looking Ahead

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¶14. (SBU) Women spoke with overwhelming despair about the situation in Somalia, especially with the escalating violence of recent weeks. Despite this sense of desperation, women identified key areas where local and international organizations could make a difference for women. These include: immediate supplies (food, medical supplies, wheelchairs, etc.), basic maternal healthcare services so women can give birth safely, reproductive health education for girls, services to deal with gender-based violence, adult education for women, micro-credit, and skills training. These programs can be realized through financial support and capacity building of local NGOs who continue to work on these issues, both in south central Somalia as well as within IDP camps.

¶15. (SBU) Our contacts detailed stories of increased killings and abuse of women and the widespread victimization of girls and women in the country. Yet they also emphasized Somali women's strength, resiliency, courage, and creativity in the face of the violence. Many women travel back and forth to the country, have started organizations to help women and refugees, and are seeking ways to amplify their voices. However, Somali women face considerable challenges and are increasingly constrained by the growing influence of al-Shabaab. We are reaching out to those Somali NGOs and women's associations which remain active, despite the enormous risk, to identify areas where we can directly assist women in their efforts to care for their families, gain skills, secure economic opportunities, and ensure that their voices are not silenced by the insecurity and instability that continues to plague Somalia.

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